

Mark Spooner
8209 Taunton Place
Springfield, Virginia 22152
mark@fairfaxschoolsmonitor.com

July 18, 2022

To: Drs. Michelle Reid, Nardos King and Sloan Presidio, and Members of the School Board

Re: Development of New Equity Policy

At the School Board's work session on July 12, the Board and its staff discussed a plan to develop a new "equity policy" for Fairfax County public schools. This process apparently supersedes the uncompleted "anti-racism, anti-bias" process that began in 2020.

Many of you emphasized at the meeting that input should be obtained from the community at every stage of developing the new policy. I attended the meeting and listened to your discussion. I have a few preliminary comments, which I hope you will consider.

I recognize that the policy is likely to cover many aspects of what the school system does, but my suggestions at this point focus mainly on academics. My comments are in three areas: What is "equity"; how will you obtain and factor in the views of your constituents; and what will be the goals of the policy?

What Does "Equity" Mean?

Some of you said at the work session that the term "equity" is a highly charged term. It certainly is. It has been used by some advocates on the left, including Ibram Kendi for example, to mean using government institutions not only to achieve equality of opportunity for all, but also to ensure equality of outcomes among racial, ethnic and other social groups in employment, income and education. In education, the goal of "equity" in this sense has led to very controversial proposals, including reducing the availability of advanced courses, attacking the importance of mastering mathematics, opposing objective testing to measure academic achievement and readiness for advanced studies, advocating different criteria for different racial groups to measure academic success, and even attacking the basic concept of meritocracy.

In the recent past, the Fairfax County school system has sometimes used the term "equity" in ways that come close to the meanings just described. Many examples can be cited; here are three: 1. A document entitled "Keeping Equity at the Center of Instruction" states that racial equity means "the development of policies, practices and strategic investments ... to ensure that outcomes ... are no longer predictable by race." 2. In the Leadership Kickoff session in August 2020, which was entitled "With Equity at the Center," Dr. Nardos King displayed Ibram Kendi's "How to Be an Anti-Racist," and then asked: "What if the intelligence of a low-testing black child in a poor, black school is different from, not inferior to, the intelligence of a

high-testing student in a rich, white school? What if we measured intelligence by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environment?" 3. The School Board eliminated objective testing for admission to TJ High School and established new rules in order to manipulate the racial makeup of the school.

I cite these examples only to illustrate that Dr. Anderson was correct when she stated at the work session that "there are many definitions of 'equity' ... we need a shared understanding." All of you agreed that terms like "equity" and "equitable outcomes" need to be carefully defined.

Some of you described "equity" in a way that would not seem controversial to most people. For example, Ms. Sizemore-Heizer stated that the objective of the Board is "to remove barriers and provide opportunities." Ms. Cohen phrased it in terms of a system that "allows every kid to feel successful." Mr. Frisch said that the school system already pursues "equity" by, for example, special ed programs, by providing extra resources to those who need them, and by reducing or waiving fees for those in need.

An example of the kind of "equity" Mr. Frisch referred to would be addressing the barrier to learning created by the Covid shutdown of in-person instruction; "equity" might support offering extra instruction to students who were most affected. Another example: Advanced courses in science and math aren't necessary for all kids to feel successful, and college isn't for everyone, so for some students, barriers might be removed, and better opportunities might be provided, by expanding programs that prepare students to be successful in essential, well-paying trades.

If the Board's concept of "equity" is truly limited to removing barriers and providing opportunities so that every child can feel successful, you can sell an "equity policy" to the public. But you must recognize that all parents want their children to receive the best possible education. Measures that hold back some students in order to provide "equity" to others will be strongly resisted (e.g., the TJ episode).

The definition of "equity" in the policy must be clear. I have received a perceptive comment on fairfaxschoolsmonitor.com saying:

"I have long believed that 'equity' is the most dangerous word in Fairfax's One Fairfax policy Attempts to define it always result in 'word salad', and the word/concept then becomes the justification for whatever decision or action the 'woke' crowd wants to take."

A "word salad" definition in the proposed policy would not lead to consensus.

One way to achieve clarity is to not only define what "equity" is, but also what it is not. On the "is not" side of the ledger, the policy should specify that "equity" does not mean any actions such as these:

- Restricting the availability of advanced studies for students who are ready for them.
- Watering down the content of courses or the standards of learning so that more students will be deemed to be proficient.
- Eliminating or degrading objective testing to measure knowledge or progress.
- Using different criteria to measure the academic readiness, progress or proficiency of students of different races, ethnicities or sexes.

Input from Constituents

There was universal agreement at the work session that input from the public should be obtained at every stage of developing the new policy. This was stressed in the presentation by staff members King and Ivey, as well as in the comments of Board members Frisch, Pekarsky, Derenak-Kaufax, Sizemore-Heizer, Omeish, and Keys-Gamarra (and perhaps others). The slide show for the meeting said that input should be obtained via a public survey, focus groups, Board advisory committees, correspondence from constituents, and public comments during the citizen participation segments of School Board meetings.

I have a few comments about this aspect of the process.

Public participation will definitely be important, but in order for it to garner widespread support, the Board and its staff must be objective, must really listen, and must take account of public concerns. A PR type of process, designed to solicit support for a preexisting agenda, will not be successful.

By way of example, I cite the expensive survey the Board administered in the spring of 2021 in connection with the development of an “anti-racism, anti-bias policy” and “controversial issues policy.” That survey was heavily skewed toward desired responses, which resulted in strong criticism by members of the public, and even by Board members in their internal communications.

The anti-racism/controversial issues process also used biased focus groups. I learned from Freedom of Information Act documents that almost all the invitees to those sessions were representatives of what the Board calls its “stakeholders,” i.e., racial/ethnic groups, LGBT advocates, teacher union representatives, and others who would be expected to support the policies being considered. Citizens who weren’t in these groups were largely excluded, even though they are the great majority of the Board’s constituents.

The slide show for the recent work session says that input will also be obtained from Board advisory committees. I don’t know much about the make-up of those committees, but I ask the Board and its staff to carefully examine whether some or all of them are burdened with the same kinds of biases as the Board’s list of “stakeholders.”

Please don’t repeat a public engagement process like the one used last year. The Board and its staff need to do a much better job of reaching out to parents and other citizens who

have had reservations about the Board's agenda. To be effective, the outreach must go beyond token representation; it must include proportionate representation of parents and other citizens who aren't currently regarded as the Board's "stakeholders."

What Are the Goals?

Establishing the goals of an equity policy was a third topic of discussion at the work session. How the Board and its staff deal with this will affect community buy-in, as well as the realistic chances that the policy goals will be achievable.

Regarding academics, the goal of the policy is closely tied to how "equity" is defined. Is the goal to create equal outcomes among all demographic groups, or is the goal to remove barriers and create opportunities so that individual students can achieve their potential and feel successful? These goals are very different. As stated in a comment I've received in the past few days on fairfaxschoolsmonitor.com:

"The suggestion that good teaching will produce equitable outcomes is to deny human nature in our diverse world. Facilitating each child's learning to produce the best each unique student has to offer will reward all who recognize and value what each child brings to the learning experience."

The Fairfax County public school system has been trying for many years to eliminate demographic differences in outcomes. A policy that mandates this result will be no more successful than other efforts have been. Demographic disparities in educational attainment might be eliminated many years from now, depending on many sociological and economic factors, most of which are beyond the control of the school system, but it is not realistic to establish this aspiration as a policy. It would be far more realistic and equitable to focus on identifying and removing true barriers to opportunity so that each unique student can achieve his or her potential.

* * *

Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Mark Spooner